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TAGS: PHUM PREL PINS TU IR

SUBJECT: IRAN/HUMAN RIGHTS: BAHAI LEADERSHIP TRIAL AND ONGOING PERSECUTION

REF: (A) ISTANBUL 374 (B) 2008 ISTANBUL 145

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Win Dayton; Reason:
1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Secretary General of Turkey's Bahai Community told us January 5 that the trial date for the Iranian Bahai leadership has been re-scheduled to January 12. He asked for USG support in raising the issue with Turkey, in the hopes Turkey would press Iran to close the case or at least let the defendants exercise their legal rights. He also updated us on the plight of other Bahai prisoners in Iran and shared a copy of a just-issued report from the Bahai's New York office describing increasing Iranian regime pressure on the Iranian Bahai community. End summary.

¶2. (C) ConGen Istanbul's NEA Iran Watcher and Human Rights officer met January 5 in Istanbul with Dr. Farzad Kuchani, the Secretary General of the Bahai Community of Turkey, at his request. Dr. Kuchani provided an update on the status of the postponed trial of Iranian Bahai community leaders detained since May 2008; the status of three Bahai teachers arrested in Shiraz in May 2006 and sentenced in November 2007 to four year prison terms; and worsening conditions confronting the Bahai community in Iran, including ongoing state-sponsored persecution, allegations of involvement in recent anti-government demonstrations, and further arrests of groups of Bahai worshippers in recent weeks.

The Bahai Leadership Trial

¶3. (C) Dr. Kuchani confirmed recent press reports that the Iranian judge responsible for trying the seven imprisoned Iranian Bahai community leaders arrested in May 2008 has set January 12 as the trial date. Although the trial has already been postponed twice by Iranian authorities (ref A), Kuchani said the Bahai Community is worried that the trial now appears likely to proceed. He pointed out what he described as "worrying signs" that the regime has been preparing to hold the trial and reach quick convictions, including the issuance of recent editorials in Iran's Kayhan newspaper (which usually reflects the views of Supreme Leader Khamenei) and Javan newspaper (which usually reflects the views of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), as well as a news report on Iran's state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) network, all asserting that Bahai'ism is responsible for the recent wave of anti-regime demonstrations and violence, and claiming that opposition candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi both had "Bahai spies" working on their campaigns. The Bahai community interprets these allegations from regime mouthpieces as a warning sign that the detained Bahai leadership will be linked in court with the opposition movement and blamed for contributing to the post-election demonstrations. "This allegation is

ridiculous," Kuchani told us, "because the Bahai always avoid politics." But Kuchani assessed nonetheless that this allegation may become the heart of the regime's legal case against the Bahai leadership, given the lack of any real evidence against them to support possible apostasy and/or espionage charges.

¶4. (C) According to Kuchani, Iranian authorities are continuing to deny the defendants their legal rights even as provided by Iran's own legal code. They are only allowed intermittent, sporadic access to their attorneys; the attorneys have not been allowed to see the evidence against the defendants; and the authorities have so far refused to permit any pre-trial proceedings to be open to the public, all of which are required by Iranian law.

¶5. (C) Assessing that the regime's sense of political vulnerability is deepening with every successive anti-regime demonstration, Kuchani suggested that international pressure on the regime on this case before January 12 -- especially bilateral pressure from governments with which Iran still has pragmatic, civil relations, like Turkey -- could prove useful in compelling the regime not to pursue the case, or at least to allow the defendants to exercise their legal rights. Kuchani asked whether the U.S. Government would consider asking the Turkish MFA to express a degree of concern to the Iranian MFA about the damage to Iran's international standing of pursuing such a case in violation of its own laws and criminal procedures. We pledged to pass Kuchani's request back to Washington promptly.

Bahai Teachers in detention since 2007

¶6. (C) Kuchani expressed concern that while the plight of the Iranian Bahai leaders facing trial had received wide attention, there were other cases of Iranian Bahai community members who have been languishing in prison for years which would also benefit from more international attention and pressure. He specifically raised the case of three Bahai teachers from Shiraz who were arrested in May 2006, re-arrested in November 2007, and sentenced to four years in prison (ref B) for teaching non-religious educational classes to Iranian youth in poor villages. Kuchani shared a copy of a Farsi-language report dated June 2008 purportedly written by a Vali Rustami, an Inspector and Legal Advisor working for the Office of Supreme Leader Khamenei, which appears to acknowledge that the three defendants broke no Iranian laws in mentoring and teaching Iranian youth. (Comment: We cannot independently assess the authenticity of that letter, a copy of which is available on the Bahai community's news service website, <https://news.bahai.org>). According to Kuchani, the three are being held in a military detention center in Shiraz, largely in solitary confinement. Their families have only been allowed to visit them twice in two years. One of them, Mr. Sasan Taqva, had a medical condition that required surgery, but Iranian authorities denied him the surgery until the prison's own doctor said it was critical that the surgery be performed.

¶7. (C) Kuchani expressed the Bahai community's gratitude for the U.S. Senate and House resolutions in 2009 that spotlighted this case and called on Iran to release all prisoners held solely on the basis of their political and religious views, and asked whether the USG would be willing to give public attention to this case in future statements and speeches relating to human rights and in USG public reporting on human rights and religious persecution in Iran. Kuchani also suggested that any USG help to encourage other like-minded governments to continue to raise these cases in public and with Iran would helpfully remind the Iranian regime that the world is watching.

Overall conditions worsening

¶8. (C) Kuchani shared with us a "summary report" issued January 5 by the Bahai community's New York office describing

ongoing persecution of the Bahai in Iran, as well as the Bahai community's list of all Iranian Bahai currently in prison (both reports scanned and emailed to NEA/IR). The summary report concludes that "over the past several months, there have been disquieting indications of intensifying pressure on the Bahai" including:

-- Interrogations and arrests: Iranian authorities have clamped down on the Bahai's "Nineteen Day Feast" ritual, whereby small groups of Bahai have dinner together once a month. (Kuchani told us that until recently, the regime allowed groups of fewer than 10 Bahai to gather together for dinner, but in recent weeks have prevented even such small groupings from gathering.)

-- Currently, 48 Iranian Bahai community members are in prison, including a group of eleven Bahai members who were arrested in Tehran on January 3 and brought to Evin prison. Kuchani did not know any further details about their condition or the possible charges against them.

-- Identification, monitoring, and harassment: Four months into Iran's 2009-2010 academic school year, the Bahai believe that Iran's education authorities are attempting to identify all Bahai students in the national school system. Once identified, Bahai students' classmates are warned by teachers not to socialize with them; they are forced to take additional religious classes; and they are expelled if they defend Bahai'ism to their teachers or classmates. A number of Bahai students at university this year have been expelled or more often simply prevented by the university administrations from registering for classes.

-- Denial of livelihood: Identified Bahai community members are denied employment in the public sector. Local commercial authorities and trade associations refuse to issue business licenses or memberships. Banks often deny Bahai loan applications. Some cities prevent more than a certain number of Bahai from engaging in any single type of business or trade, and take steps to restrict their annual income. Several Bahai who own optical stores have been told that the government had ruled that Bahai may not own such stores, and are taking steps to close them.

-- Incitement to hatred: "The campaign to incite hatred against the Bahais continues unabated." Examples include the Supreme Leader's Representative at Azad University in Orumieh launching a project to examine the "difference between the deviant Bahai and Wahhabi sects" and how to combat them; Iranian government's Fars news agency offering a series of "scientific research seminars" focusing on "deviant mystical sects" like Bahaiism; and frequent anti-Bahai editorials in Kayhan, including a November 22 editorial claiming that Saudi Arabia voted to support the IAEA Board of Governors censure of Iran only because of the links between Bahaiism and Wahhabism.

But Iranian Bahai morale remains high

¶9. (C) Despite the severe persecution and repressive conditions confronting the Bahai community in Iran, Kuchani told us that the community's morale is "higher than ever", insisting that the regime's pressure is bringing the Iranian Bahai community members ever closer. Kuchani suggested that the numbers of Iranian Bahai members fleeing Iran to seek refugee status in Turkey and onward resettlement to the west actually dropped in 2009.

Comments

¶10. (C) Kuchani's appeal for the USG to keep these cases in the spotlight, and to encourage countries like Turkey also to raise these cases, is a clear indication of the Bahai community's concern for its besieged members in Iran. "They need all the help they can get." Kuchani and the Bahai Community of Turkey are convinced especially that if the

Turkish MFA -- especially FM Davutoglu -- is willing to raise the plight of the Iranian Bahai directly with his Iranian counterpart, the regime would pay attention.

¶11. (C) As noted in ref A, we agree with Dr. Kuchani's assessment that a high-level Turkish effort to raise the Bahai defendants' case with Iran might get the regime's attention, though given ongoing discussions with Turkey on other Iran topics (not to mention other regional issues), we defer to Washington as to whether such a request would be an effective use of our diplomatic capital. Given the possibly impending trial date of January 12, any decision to raise this issue with Turkey should be made in the coming days.
End comment.

WIENER